

BACK TO THE FOLD

One Prison May Hide Another...

Testimony of a former inmate
Documented by
Hassan Sahily

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MENA PRISON FORUM

[A project by **UMAM D&R**]

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FAMILY JURISDICTION, EVEN BEHIND BARS!

The topography of the prison dormitory had itself a social dimension... It wouldn't be an exaggeration to call it a "class dimension." It was essentially divided into three sections: closest to the entrance was where the "chairperson" of the cell—call him whatever you want—would sit surrounded by his entourage and his favorites. It was a kind of divan where food was served but was also a kind of "information point" for newcomers. Being closest to the entrance, it was the most aerated part of the dormitory—you could feel the breeze produced by the fans hanging on the ceiling—and it also had a view of the television in the warden's room. The middle of the cell was the most populated section. These were the average inmates. They were not allowed to move forward, though some of them may have had family ties with the chairperson. The section furthest back, the "rear" as we called it, was the one nearest the toilets and the makeshift sink. Being placed there meant one of two things: either that the prisoner in question was about to finish his term of punishment or that he was downtrodden and lacked any status. As things changed and I had the opportunity to be upgraded to the first class section, my move reordered the position of the inmates, causing a few of them to get closer to the rear, in other words: to the toilets...

This is how journalist Hassan Sahili, who collected and drafted the testimony of X***, renders the story as told to him by his interlocutor who served several weeks in a cell in the prison in Zahle, a town

in eastern Lebanon. In this account, the reader sees how the geographic and social organization of that cell is copy-pasted from the world outside it, or at least this is how it seems to X***, who found himself there after being arrested for a trivial, drug-related issue.

In comparison to the many others who have shared their testimonies about time spent in prison, including the others in the MENA Prison Forum Logs series, X*** cannot compete in regard to the time spent behind bars, nor in terms of his treatment, nor can he claim that the actions that led him to be there was the noblest cause in the world. However, this testimony, the third of the MENA Prison Forum Logs series, is no less violent and powerful than the those of individuals who spent long years in prison and were subjected to the most inhumane torture. This testimony is, in fact, a story of an endless, three-fold imprisonment experience.

It took X*** being physically jailed to realize that up until he became an adult, he had never left his possessive family. He was brought up in a rural region within a family culturally at odds with its clan environment despite the kinship associating it with this milieu. X*** suffered from asthma, and consequently did not grow up like his peers. It took him a while before he moved away from his family and started to find his own way. Nevertheless, the difficulties of his upbringing were not easily forgotten and even once away from the family he became hostage to a deep crisis of self-esteem.

X*** didn't realize how mentally and emotionally fastened to this past he still was until his weeks-long carceral experience. However, this discovery was not the worst thing he went through in prison. Once jailed, he found out that the cell he was to be confined in was largely filled with inmates from his mother's clan, most of whom were there for drug related crimes.

During this time in prison X*** found himself to be out of sync with his peers. As a youth he was under the protection of his mother and father, but here, in the wilderness, he had no other choice but to voluntarily come back into the fold, putting himself under the protection of his extended family and enjoying the luxury and security of the first class section in the cell.

In spite of being imprisoned on a second floor dormitory of the prison of Zahle, the feeling of being dumped somewhere, in some underground oubliette, never left me... it wasn't to do with the location in which I was confined, but with

myself: in that dormitory, under the supervision of my family, I felt that I went back to square one in terms of all of the effort that I had made to recover myself.

A couple weeks after his arrest X*** was set free. Free? Well not exactly.

I didn't spend more than a couple weeks in prison. I forget how long... I felt as if I had spent years inside... Still today, four years after that experience, every time I step into a enclosed space the same feelings grip me once again. I went to see a psychiatrist. He gave me some medication but it did not really help. Indeed, I feel free of it from time to time, but too often I'm the prey of my memories and I have the impression that they are assaulting me again: I don't want to be denounced and taken to jail again... I don't want to be at the mercy of my cousins/cellmates again... And as soon as I recover from this spate of anxiety, I realize that most of my former inmates were set free... and are today carrying on, good or bad, with their respective lives and that I'm the only one who's still in the dormitory there.

While this testimony X*** shared with Sahili seems to deliver a confession that does not hide its subjective and introspective nature, it would be unfair to discount all that this tells us about the prison culture in Lebanon, and especially about the perception of prison as an "occupational hazard" within some communities, such as the one to which X*** belongs.

Given all this, this booklet's subtitle deserves to be understood more as a statement and general observation than a subjective conclusion of the specific experiences X*** gained through incarceration: one prison may hide another, and any given society may hide a lot of prisons.